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THE CASE FOR FLEXIBLE WORK OPTIONS AND THE "ON-DEMAND" PROFESSIONAL?

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Abstract

The time demands of professional jobs such as law, medicine and accountancy are high and studies have shown work-family conflict has become a major obstacle to progress in gender equity. More lucrative and remunerative occupations, on average, require longer hours. Indeed, success depends on "primary commitment to work and career" and in some cases, participating in the "face time" culture. This paper will provide a framework for understanding the relationship between flexible work options and potential dual agenda outcomes for individuals and organisations.

THE CASE FOR FLEXIBLE WORK OPTIONS AND THE "ON-DEMAND" PROFESSIONAL?

A paralegal, an associate and a partner of a prestigious Melbourne law firm are walking through the Treasury Gardens on their way to lunch when they find an antique oil lamp. They rub it and a Genie comes out in a puff of smoke.

The Genie says: "I usually only grant three wishes, so I'll give each of you just one each".

"Me first! Me first" says the paralegal. "I want to be in the Whitsunday Islands, sailing a yacht, without a care in the world." Poof! He's gone.

In astonishment, "Me next! Me next!" says the associate. "I want to be in Hawaii, relaxing on the beach with my personal masseuse, an endless supply of pina coladas and the love of my life." Poof! She's gone.

You're next" the Genie says to the partner.

The partner says, "I want those two back in the office after lunch" (Anonymous)

"Being available on demand" could be the mantra for the modern professional worker trying to balance work and life responsibilities in a world where working long hours is becoming part of the psychological contract between employee and employer (Pocock, van Wanrooy, Strazzari, & Bridge, 2001). Time on the job has become an indicator of the level of employee commitment to the organisation (Arkin, 1997; Lagerfeld, 1998), therefore the more hours worked the more committed an employee appears. The time demands of professional jobs such as law, medicine and accountancy are high and studies have shown work-family conflict has become a major obstacle to progress in gender equity. Work-family conflict is defined as a type of inter-role conflict in which the role demands stemming from one domain (work or family) are incompatible with role demands stemming from another domain (family or work) (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985).

The significant changes in the demography of the labour market have meant that the number of people that need to balance work responsibilities with family responsibilities has dramatically increased. There has been an increasing focus on work and family issues because of the increase in women in the paid workforce, the increasing diversity in family and living arrangements, the growth in part time and casual employment, the demise of standard working hours, increased stress and pressure on workers, and the impact of globalisation on business (Bardoel, Tharenou, & Ristov, 2000a). For example, similar to many other OECD countries, Australia has experienced a dramatic increase in the participation of women in the labour market. Between 1970 and 2002, the seasonally adjusted female participation rate in the Australian labour force increased from 37.9 per cent to 55.5 per cent (Australian Department of Family and Community Services and Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, 2002). However, a unique feature of the Australian labour market is that most of that increase has occurred in the part-time sector and female participation in the full time workforce has changed very little over the past three decades.

Simultaneously, employees are increasingly expecting to be able to have a more fulfilling life by balancing their work lives and their non-work lives (UMR Research Pty Ltd, 2001). While women and men now begin their professional careers with rough parity, women frequently fail to advance. One reason is the conflict between the demands of paying jobs and those of parenthood. Both are time-intensive and demanding. The time demands of professional jobs such as law, medicine and accountancy are high. Understanding the major factors that impact on work/life issues for professionals is important if organisations are to develop flexible work practices that will make it possible for women (and men) to both parent and work. Flexible work options have been acclaimed as a way of assisting employees integrate their work and personal lives but do they really challenge the ingrained assumptions that are the core of work for many professionals? This

paper will provide a framework for understanding the relationship between flexible work options and potential dual agenda outcomes for individuals and organisations.

THE CHALLENGES FOR PROFESSIONAL WORKERS

The Hours Creep

One of the major challenges for professionals to achieving a balance between their work and personal lives is that there is often a positive correlation between hours and "career success" and occupational prestige. Some professional groups and management executives work 70-80 hours per week with extra work in times of heavy demand (Beder, 2001; Buchanan & van Wanrooy, 2001). Why should we be concerned about the long hours that professionals put in? As a senior colleague said to me the other day "That's just the way it is". Perhaps, but 30 years ago it was the norm that most employed people had jobs that provided regular working hours averaging about 40 hours per week. According to Wooden (2001), many persons working in full time jobs report working much longer hours and in some cases exceeding 60 hours per week. As maintained by a report prepared for the Australian Centre for Industrial Relations Research and Training (ACIIRT) the changes that have occurred in working time arrangements are not without costs to Australian families (Buchanan & van Wanrooy, 2001). These include undesirable consequences for employees' health as a result of increased stress, fatigue and isolation. Other costs include the decline in the quality of life and intimacy and the reconfiguration of community "from street to workplace" as people have less available free time for social and community life (Pocock, 2003).

The trend towards working long hours is associated with post-industrial life in affluent societies. According to Beder (2001), anthropologists estimate that hunter-gatherer societies were able to meet their needs and enjoy an adequate diet with 20-35 hours work per week. Similarly, it is thought that peasants doing agricultural work in medieval times worked between 120-150 days in a year, although some of these days would have been long, varying according to growth cycles and seasons. Industrial employers had a big incentive to increase the hours that workers worked because they were paid by the day or week and so extra hours did not cost the employer any more. Firms that were able to get more work out of their workers for a given wage obtained a competitive advantage and thus other firms were forced to follow (Beder, 2001).

While some employees need the extra income, those working the longest hours are often the most highly paid and educated in the workforce (Lagerfeld, 1998; Lewis & Cooper, 1999). Dawkins (1996) found that in Australia, managers and professionals make up half of all employees working in excess of 60 hours per week. One explanation for professionals and managers working long hours is that workplace culture reinforces the belief that working long hours demonstrates commitment to the organisation, and that this is required to successfully climb the career ladder (Arkin, 1997; Glass, 2000; Lagerfeld, 1998). Broadbridge (1999) found that this culture is often reinforced in many organisations by employees making comments to co-workers (who do not work long hours) about not putting in enough effort. These workers then feel guilty about leaving work at five pm, and feel obliged to work later to give the appearance that they are working hard.

> I know for a fact that people here work on average 11 hours a day – you know some work 10, some work 12 so on average 11 hours a day. A lot of them don't work flat out all of that time and a lot of them feel they just have to be here. (Quote from female lawyer interviewed for ACIRRT Report, Buchanan & van Wanrooy, 2001)

The Ideal Worker

A model of work has developed over time that assumes that the worker is free from family responsibilities, and can work when and where the employer so desires. This model is based on the traditional male "breadwinner" employee (Lewis, 2001; Rothausen, 2002) and is now often referred to as the "ideal worker norm". The ideal worker puts work before family, works

continuously, not taking a break from his or her career, and regularly works long hours (Drago & Tseng, 2003). However, the assumptions the model is based on are outdated. For example, it can no longer be assumed that male employees are free of family responsibilities, as only one in six Australian families has one parent working (Bardoel, Tharenou, & Ristov, 2000). Women and men who want to be more involved in the direct care of their family are likely to experience conflict between their work and family roles and will not be able to fulfill the expectations of the ideal worker.

Drago (2001) observed that the diversity of work-family conflicts is different depending on what level one inhabits in the labour market. At the top end of the labour market, we find dual-earner couples whose lives are structured by the "ideal worker" norm. These men and women have professional careers, but cannot make time for their children without risking career failure. Lower down the pay scale are dual-earner, working class couples who cannot afford nannies or high-priced childcare centres, so end up handling family commitments through shift-work arrangements, self-employment, low-wage part-time employment, help from other family members and friends, and latch-key arrangements for childcare (Drago, 2001). Much of the focus of organisational work-family initiatives is at the top end of the labour market comprised of professionals. Glass and Camarigg (1992) found that higher status managers and professionals had greater access to family responsive policies than less skilled workers. Schmidt (1996) found in a study of 11 accounting firms, family friendly benefits varied according to position and duration of employment and for example, paid maternity leave was restricted in all but one firm to managers, partners, and long standing employees. Konrad and Mangel (2000) found that higher percentage of professionals were positively associated with more extensive work-life programs but the irony is that often they are working such long hours that they are effectively prevented from accessing these policies. This empirical evidence would suggest that organisations deliberately target employees with certain job profiles to receive work-family benefits. From a human capital perspective these employees are more 'valuable' and offering work and family will assist companies in recruiting and retaining valued employees, improving commitment to the company, reducing turnover, and improving employee performance on the job.

Perlow (1998) argues that time became a signifier of commitment because many people consider it difficult to measure the productivity of professionals and managers. Front line workers can demonstrate commitment by increasing productivity (e.g. call centre workers could answer more phone calls), whereas managers and professionals often need to show commitment by being present. The belief that time input signifies commitment is socially constructed (Lewis, 2001) and research such as Jacobsen's (2000) study involving nurses, demonstrated that the more hours worked, the less employees were committed to the organisation.

However there are organisations that are trying to change the notion that the 'ideal workers' are those employees that work excessively long hours. The long hours that employees put in cannot always be at full capacity and that it is more to do with a 'face time' culture that requires employees to be present even if they are not being particularly productive (Buchanan & van Wanrooy, 2001).

Career Penalties

Research has demonstrated that workers are penalized if they do not conform to the ideal worker norm. Allen and Russell (1999) found that employees who had taken parental leave, were less likely to be recommended for rewards and were perceived to be not as committed as the employees who had not taken parental leave. Clark (2000) concluded that employees are seen as less committed after choosing flexible working arrangements, and Perlow (1998) described the case of a female engineer, considered to be a star employee, whose performance was subsequently rated in the bottom twenty percent of employees after she commenced a flexible work schedule.

Even small differences in working hours can affect employees' income. In a study comparing single and dual income families, Brett (1997) found that even after controlling for education,

experience, and seniority, men in dual income families earned less than men who were the sole family breadwinner. The main detectable difference between the two groups was that those with a partner in paid employment, on average worked two hours less per week than the single income males. According to Brett, this difference in hours worked accounted for a significant proportion of the difference in salaries. All men in this study were earning a salary, not paid by the hour.

Employees who have a career break also appear to be penalized for not adhering to the ideal worker norm. Schneer and Reitman (1990) surveyed 884 MBA graduates and found that those who had experienced either voluntary or involuntary employment gaps earned significantly less than those who had a history of continuous employment.

As the ideal worker norm is based on the traditional male "breadwinner" model of work, men who stray from what is expected might be more severely penalized than women. In the study of MBA graduates mentioned above, Schneer and Reitman (1990) also discovered that men were penalized more heavily than women. Men earned 25 per cent less, and women earned 15 per cent less than colleagues of the same gender who had no employment gaps. Allen and Russell (1999) also found that men who had taken parental leave were less likely to be recommended for rewards than women who had taken parental leave.

According to Drago, Colbeck et al. (2003) individuals who choose to take on caregiving responsibilities are often likely to experience career penalties and therefore less likely to reach senior level positions. The phenomenon can mask itself in gender neutrality since men as well as women can in theory perform caregiving. However, Drago et al. (2003) argue that people, and particularly women, often respond to the prospect of bias attached to any caregiving role by deploying strategies to avoid it. According to Drago et al (2003) "bias avoidance" occurs when individuals either deny themselves opportunities to take on family commitments, or attempt to minimize or hide the existence of family commitments. Employees engage in bias avoidance behaviour to escape potential career penalties. Because women continue to do a disproportionate share of child care and domestic duties, the issue of work-family conflict is particularly important to women (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Nordenmark, 2002).

Flexible Work Options and Professionals

Employees such as professionals with higher human capital are more likely to reap the benefits of corporate paternalism (Becker & Gerhart, 1996) but there is a trend towards offering increased flexibility rather than benefits. It has been argued in this paper that for professional employees pressures on individuals and organisations are likely to lead to flexible work options being offered by organisations. The pressures on individuals include career penalties, long hour work culture, and the ideal worker norm. On the other hand, the pressures on organisations include business costs such as increased absenteeism, turnover, burnout of employees and reduced commitment and productivity. Flexible work options are a means of challenging the ingrained assumptions that are the heart of work environments for professionals.

Catalyst (2004) identifies four main forms of flexible work arrangements, which include informal flexibility (i.e. varying work schedule or setting on an occasional basis), career path flexibility (e.g. postponing a promotion or relocation to a later time), full-time flexible work options (e.g. flexitime, telecommuting), and flexible reduced time options (e.g. part-time work, job sharing).

Lee, Engler and Wright (2002) report evidence that part-time or reduced workload work is increasing in popularity in professional jobs and observe that at one level this is surprising because it challenges the traditional assumptions about what it means to be the committed professional who works long hours and is committed to serving client needs. Case study evidence suggests that women are feeling challenged and exhausted by the need to be a full time worker in a high powered job while still being the perfect mother (Hawkins, 2003; Liff & Ward, 2001; Pocock, 2003). Many Australian women work part time in order to care for small children (Drago & Tseng, 2003; Lewis & Smithson, 2001). However, part time jobs are usually construed as outside the mainstream of the organisation and the participants are seldom given the high profile projects or

essential jobs necessary to be noticed and promoted (Liff & Ward, 2001). In fact, as noted above, the ability and willingness to work more than full time is a very strong predictor of the probability of being promoted (Lewis, 1999; Liff & Ward, 2001). This has particular relevance to the Australian labour market because of the high percentage of women who work part-time. As Gaze (2001) observes "many people still see mothers (but not fathers!) with children as marginal in the public sphere, unreliable, not serious about their work, and uncommitted" (p.203).

Flexible work arrangements such as telecommuting, and part-time and reduced load work are becoming more widely available within the professions of law, medicine and accounting. However, professionals within each of these professions also use other strategies to assist them balance their work and personal lives, such as choosing to work in particular specialities which might be less time consuming or perhaps characterised by less unpredictable time demands.

Lee et al. (2002) identified several reasons for the growth in alternative work arrangements in law, medicine and accounting. The first is that the number of women graduates from law, medicine and accounting has been steadily increasing and as these women progress in their careers many have sought to vary the traditional fulltime workload. The second is more and more of the professionals are dual career or single parent families and do not have one parent devoted solely to family work and need flexibility in their work schedules to cope with their family demands. The third reason concerns the characteristics of each of these professions, which to a limited extent have facilitated alternative work arrangements. For example, all provide services where individual productivity and performance can be rewarded on client or patient load. In addition, each of the professions offers specialty options with different lifestyle implications. A final explanation identified by Lee et al. (2002) is that all three fields are facing a shake up of their traditional cultures and structures because of changes in demands for services and shifts in how and where they are provided. This has led to organisations experimenting with different types of work arrangements. In particular providing flexibility can be an effective tool for developing greater work productivity and effectiveness.

The Business Case for Flexible Work-Life Initiatives

The business case for adopting work-life programs can be defined in terms of a dual agenda benefiting both the companies and the employees (Bailyn, Drago, & Kochan, 2001). The use of flexibility has proven to be an effective means for companies to improve productivity. For example, studies conducted by the world renowned consulting company, Watson Wyatt have consistently identified several key human resource practices that are associated with higher value and provide support for the business case to implement work-life related practices. In 1999, Watson Wyatt launched the Human Capital Index (HCI) study in North America and became the first to demonstrate the link between superior human capital practices and shareholder value creation (Watson Wyatt Worldwide, 2002). The Watson Wyatt Human Capital Index (HCI) Study 2001/02 found that overall excellence in collegial and flexible workplaces had a 7.8% increase on shareholder value creation and that flexible work arrangements accounted for 1.7% of this 7.8%.

According to Catalyst (2004) flexibility has a number of benefits for professional workers and their organisations. These benefits meet the Bailyn et al. (2001) dual agenda criteria. The company has the benefit of employees with uninterrupted times to complete certain tasks and accommodate urgent work requests and who are also available to colleagues and clients in other time zones. On the other hand, the employee has a number of benefits such as the ability to be able to address life interests and needs put aside during periods of heavy workloads; time to care for children or sick family members; time to exercise; engage in hobbies and community activities; ability to avoid long commutes; time for exercise; means of transition from fulltime work to retirement; and also an opportunity to pursue educational qualifications or certifications.

Organisational Case Studies of Alternative Work Arrangements for Professionals

Organisations which sometimes appear to have effective HR policies to promote work/life balance have shown in fact to be doing the opposite by putting systems in place where the focus has been to enable employees to spend more time at work rather than spend time with the family or leisure activities. Catalyst (2004) state there is three things that need to be in place for flexible work options to be effective in achieving a dual agenda. They need to challenge unspoken norms about the ideal worker, provide organisational supports for managers and employees to work effectively, and incorporate organisational systems that focus on outcomes not hours.

Two organisations (Harmers Workplace Lawyers and Ernst and Young) were selected to illustrate the different approaches that have been used by organisations in providing flexible work options to professional employees. The information about both these organisations was obtained from attending conference presentations where representatives from these organisations presented information about the flexible work options their organisations provided. Both Harmers and Ernst and Young have won awards for their work and family practices.

Harmers[1]

Harmers Workplace Lawyers (formerly Michael Harmer & Associates) was formed in 1996 and is one of Australia's largest employment and industrial law practices with offices in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. Law firms with their emphasis on billable hours and revenue flow are not usually associated with family friendly workplaces but Harmers has demonstrated that by challenging traditional assumptions that it is possible to promote effective work/life balance. A philosophy that permeated through the firm from its inception was the need for the firm to internally reflect good workplace practice because this was part of the advice often given to clients. In fact one of Harmers' principles reflects this "We stand for …balance (high level professional careers with social, emotional, family, physical and spiritual pursuits)". Harmers has developed a culture of more acceptance of the right for its employees to have a life outside work by developing effective HR systems that provide an integrated HR strategy and systems, policies and procedures, remuneration structure, and training. Harmers has structured its remuneration system so that everyone is on profit share and that no one is rewarded on an individual basis. This has meant that there is an emphasis on sharing the workload and teamwork rather than individual billable hours. In addition Harmers supported the concept of part-time 'equity partners' and currently has two part-time 'equity partners' which is not the norm in the legal firm industry. These actions have laid the foundation for challenging the cultural assumptions of long hours being the sole measure of effectiveness.

In developing an effective HR system that will support a culture more supportive of enabling people to balance their work and lives outside work, there has been a focus on developing systems that will ensure that client deadlines are met. The firm has what it calls a 'two up policy' and this means that a senior practitioner is paired with a junior practitioner and the clients are informed that two people will be assigned their file and which days of the week either practitioner will be available. Harmers have found that the majority of clients are happy with these arrangements. In addition they have a team support system to deal with crisis situations (e.g. having to appear before the Commission at short notice) and this enables the workload to also be spread across staff so that one person is not left to do an 'all nighter'.

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[1] Molnar, C. & Barham, K. (2004). Paper presented at the Work/Life Association Roundtable, Monash Conference Centre, 30 Collins Street, February.

Ernst and Young[2]

Ernst and Young in the US have focussed very much on encouraging flexible work arrangements rather than specific work life integration strategies (Gockel & Pardoe, 2004). According to Gockel and Pardoe (2004) the term flexibility resonates more than work/life with their workforce and it is easier to help people be more flexible to achieve their personal and professional goals than to assist individuals achieve work/life integration. In doing so the major strategy used by Ernst and Young provide employees with technology to support and enhance flexibility to employees.

Table 1 summarises the characteristics of the flexible work options offered at Harmers and Ernst and Young and provides examples of the types of action steps firms need to consider when creating a flexible work culture.

Table 1: Characteristics of flexible work cultures at Harmers and Ernst and Young

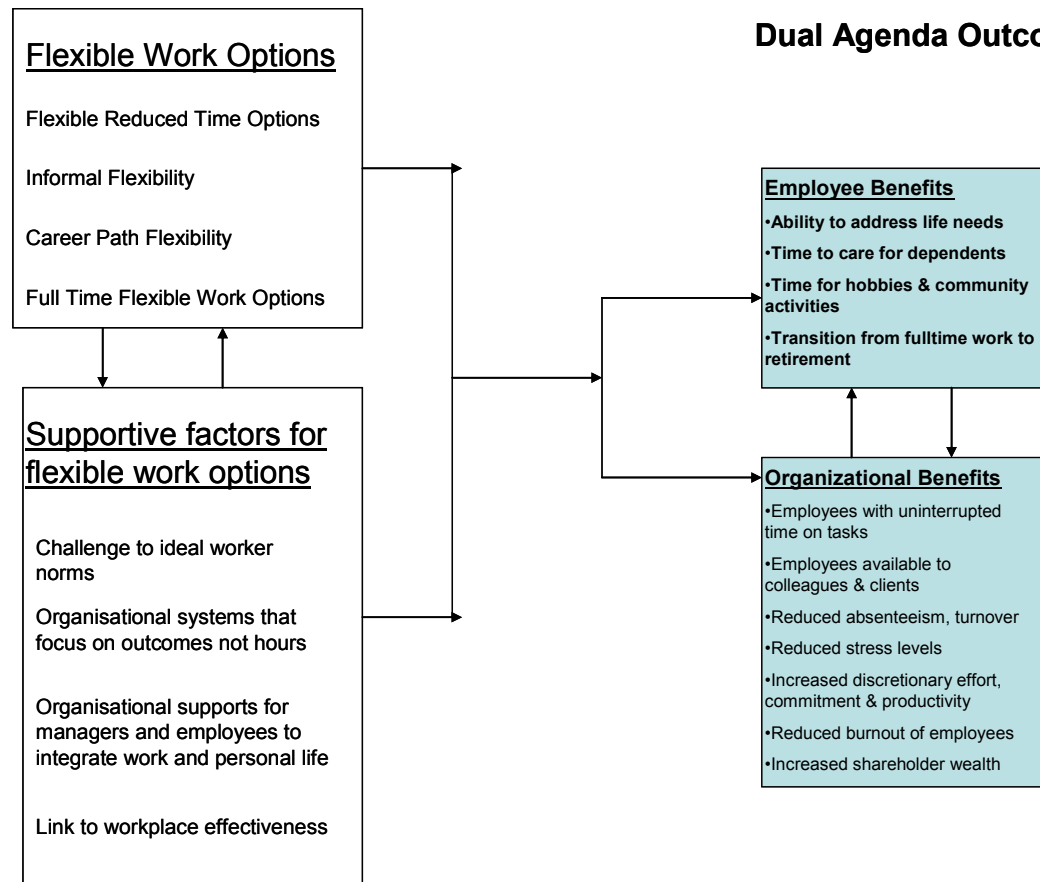|	Challenge unspoken norms about the ideal worker	Organisational supports for managers and employees to work effectively	Organisational systems that focus on outcomes not hours
Harmers Lawyers Focus	• Team based remuneration system • Part-time equity partners	• Digital dictation and teleworking to enable employees to work at home	• Two-up policy for dealing with clients • Team support for dealing with crisis situations
Ernst and Young Focus	• Flexible work arrangements (which includes reduced schedule, compressed work week, telework, short term seasonal, flexitime and jobshare).	• Laptop computers to most employees and 24/7 technical support • "TimeFinders" – tips on how to save time using technology • Email and Voicemail – tips on leveraging how to get the most from these programs • Email and Voicemail – tips on leveraging how to get the most from these programs • Collaborative software tools e.g. meetings • "Sametime" (Instant messaging) • "FollowMe" – allows calls to employee's E&Y number to follow them to their mobile phone, home office, or wherever designated.	

A framework of Flexible Work Options for Professionals

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[2] Gockel, M., & Pardoe, B. (2004). *Flexibility, not work-life integration, as a strategy.* Paper presented at the Progress in Motion 8th Annual Alliance of Work Life Progress Conference, Phoenix, Arizona.

It is contended that those companies that understand the business rationale for providing workplace flexibility are more likely to be adept at working with their employees to identify innovative solutions and provide their managers and employees with tools to implement changes. Catalyst (2004) recommends four important steps to create and manage a flexible work environment. First, it is important to develop a strong and consistent message about flexibility being linked to workplace effectiveness. Second, it is important to challenge unspoken norms that reward face time over results. Third, it is important to review organisational systems to ensure outcomes not hours measure performance. Finally, it is essential to provide adequate organisational supports for managers and employees to manage more flexibly.

Figure 1 provides a framework of the link between flexible work options, the supportive factors for flexible work options, and dual agenda outcomes. Figure 1 provides the categories of constructs that can be tested. At the core of this framework is the interaction between flexible work options and the factors that encourage support of flexible work options. The arrows represent broadly indicative links and at this stage do not provide differential relationships between different types of flexible work options, the supportive factors for flexible work options, and dual agenda outcomes. Research is needed that examines the relative importance of particular types of flexible work options and their importance in explaining particular dual agenda outcomes. For example are flexible reduced time options more likely to lead to particular individual benefits (e.g. ability to address life needs) or organisational benefits (e.g. increased discretionary effort, commitment and productivity)? A critical part of the process of achieving the dual agenda is that organisations need to perceive that there is a benefit to them. If flexible work options are to provide an avenue for addressing gender inequalities while promoting the quality of family life, we must also understand the relationship between these variables. It is then possible to take informed steps to eliminate fundamental temporal conflicts that remain at the heart of the work-family experience for many.

Figure 1: Framework of the relationship between flexible work options and dual agenda outcomes

Dual Agenda Outcomes

Flexible Work Options
- Flexible Reduced Time Options
- Informal Flexibility
- Career Path Flexibility
- Full Time Flexible Work Options

Supportive factors for flexible work options
- Challenge to ideal worker norms
- Organisational systems that focus on outcomes not hours
- Organisational supports for managers and employees to integrate work and personal life
- Link to workplace effectiveness

Employee Benefits
- **Ability to address life needs**
- **Time to care for dependents**
- **Time for hobbies & community activities**
- **Transition from fulltime work to retirement**

Organizational Benefits
- Employees with uninterrupted time on tasks
- Employees available to colleagues & clients
- Reduced absenteeism, turnover
- Reduced stress levels
- Increased discretionary effort, commitment & productivity
- Reduced burnout of employees
- Increased shareholder wealth

CONCLUSION

Flexible work options have the potential to offer benefits to both individuals and organisations. There is much evidence that there is a strong positive correlation between hours and "career success"/occupational prestige. Often the hours that professionals such as lawyers, accountants and physicians work are set by custom and interest where professionals and managers are required to be available outside of normal business hours. In addition, flexible work schedules such as part-time work are typically marginalized. Why should we be concerned? One of the reasons is that long and rising hours, primary commitment, high intensity, and face time have all combined to create significant levels of job burnout and negative job to home spillover for many professionals. Indeed, success often depends on "primary commitment to work and career" and in some cases, participating in the "face time" culture. Finally, if we are going to address gender inequalities while promoting the quality of family life it is important to review those organisational practices that are built on the assumption that employees have no responsibilities or interests outside of work. As Bailyn and Fletcher (2003) concluded when a significant part of the population does not have a traditionally masculine life situation it is important to provide equitable but not identical conditions that allow employees to live up to their full potential.

In summary, testing propositions related to how different categories of flexible work options are related to dual agenda outcomes will help us to understand if the provision of these practices is actually helpful in eliminating temporal conflicts that remain at the heart of the work-family experience for many professionals.

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